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Teddy Roosevelt and the Navy's PRT

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By **Andre Sobocinski, historian, [U.S. Navy Bureau of Medicine and Surgery](#)**



Navy Medical School students immersed in morning exercises ca






Today's U.S. Navy espouses a "culture of fitness," and "physical readiness," but this was not always so. In the early 1900s, many including the president himself, Theodore Roosevelt, were appalled by the lack of physical conditioning in the Navy.

In his autobiography, Roosevelt wrote, "Many of the older officers were so unfit physically that their condition would have excited laughter, had it not been so serious to think that they belonged to the military arm of the Government."1 Not being one to sit aimlessly aside on any

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issue of importance, Roosevelt charged forth with an attempt to change the desk-bound culture of the military. As a result he helped establish the forerunner of today’s Physical Readiness Training Program (PRT).

Without question, Roosevelt was a fitness fanatic who more than compensated in adulthood for the infirmities that plagued his childhood. He enjoyed boxing, climbing, hiking, horseback riding, polo, rowing, tennis, swimming, weightlifting and even jiu-jitsu. All of which he did to the extreme. He brought exercise equipment to the White House and even had a boxing ring set up where he would spar with professional prizefighters, including the legendary John L. Sullivan.² Whether it was rigorous exercise or outdoor life or political reform, Roosevelt seemed to direct the full force of his spirit into living the “strenuous life.” As part of this philosophy he believed nothing was gained without hard work; and maintaining one’s moral and physical character was almost a patriotic duty.³

On Nov. 17, 1908, Roosevelt suggested to the Secretary of the Navy Truman Newberry that the Navy needed its own [physical fitness test](#).^{4,5} Under Roosevelt’s omnipresent watch, Secretary Newberry and [Rear Adm. Presley M. Rixey](#), Chief of Bureau of Medicine and Surgery, developed new annual endurance test worthy of the president (and arguably molded in his image!)

The new test gave officers the choice of completing one of three options: a fifty mile walk within three consecutive days and in total of twenty hours; a ride on horseback at a distance of ninety miles within three consecutive days; or a ride on a bicycle at a distance of 100 miles within three consecutive days. All personnel taking the test would be examined by a [Navy Medical Board](#) to determine whether the test may be taken without risk and report again to the board upon completion.⁶ Officers would not be promoted unless they passed the exam and their medical record would now include a fitness report.

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Theodore Roosevelt on horseback jumping over a split rail fence, 1902. Roosevelt was not one to sit idly by. (Library of Congress)

The Roosevelt endorsed physical fitness directive was issued as Navy General Order No. 6 on Jan. 4, 1909. As one newspaper put it, “This [order] will give the corpulent sea fighters who have long occupied swivel chairs an opportunity to get into fit condition for the ordeal.”⁷

Almost immediately the directive was subject to criticism. Navy Surgeon James Gatewood complained that the endurance test would leave participants in a “depressed physical state” and therefore have a negative impact on physical readiness. He believed the Navy would benefit more if it maintained golf courses, bowling alleys and tennis courts at its installations.⁸ Other Navy medical personnel proposed building gymnasiums where both officers and enlisted would have access to exercise “appliances.”⁹

The authors of Navy General Order No. 6 could do little to ensure its survival. Roosevelt would leave office in March 1909. And despite being offered a third term as Surgeon General, Rear Adm. Rixey retired on Feb. 4, 1910. His successor Rear Adm. Charles Stokes reported to the new SECNAV [George von Meyer](#) on Aug. 15, 1910 that “After 18 months it has been plainly demonstrated that the objects sought for [with General Order No. 6] have not been attained. On the other hand much harm has been done to the service through the enforcement of this order.”¹⁰ Stokes called for the abolishment of the physical test and proposed shorter walks (25 miles in two days) and an “exercise period for physical betterment” following the tenants outlined in the book *Mit System* (1904) by Danish gymnastics educator Jørgen Peter Müller.¹¹

The Navy published a revised General Order on Dec. 14, 1910 (Navy General Order 94) that now applied to both the Navy and Marine Corps. Every quarter officers would be required to

walk twenty-five miles in two consecutive days (five hours allowed for each day).¹² The fitness tests were further modified by General Order No 127 on Oct. 14, 1911, which reduced the distance to ten miles within the time limit of four hours every month.^{13,14} Ultimately, Roosevelt was not pleased with the adulteration of his program. In his autobiography, he insisted that a walk completed in one day was of no value in demonstrating endurance; only an exam that continued on succeeding days would prove an individual's physical condition.

The physical fitness examination was ultimately suspended on April 6, 1917 on account of World War I by Navy General Order 284. Remarkably, the PRT experiment in the Navy would be laid to rest for almost fifty years before being rekindled.¹⁵

Endnotes

1. Roosevelt, Theodore. *An Autobiography*. New York: Macmillan Company, 1914. p48.
2. Lansford, Tom. *Teddy Roosevelt in Perspective*. New York: Nova Science Publishers, 2005.
3. Term came from a speech given in 1899 in which Roosevelt exclaimed, "Above all, let us shrink from no strife, moral or physical, within or without the nation, provided we are certain that the strife is justified, for it is only through strife, through hard and dangerous endeavor, that we shall ultimately win the goal of true national greatness."
4. Roosevelt, Theodore to Truman Newberry. 17 November 1908. M & S No. 116257. BUMED Correspondence Files. RG 52. National Archives.
5. Dr. Rixey echoed the president's beliefs that physical fitness was tied to readiness. On 20 November, Rixey wrote to the president expressing his concerns over the officers deemed unhealthy and likely to request a waiver from the exam. "It is the opinion of the Bureau [of Medicine] that many such officers will suffer breakdown upon the advent of war and fail to render any adequate return to the Government which has, for many years perhaps, educated them for this very crisis. It should be remembered, moreover, that those physically incompetent take the place of others, with equal opportunities, would render most efficient service." Rixey, Presley. Memorandum for the Secretary of the Navy Regarding the President's Suggestion as to the advisability of having a physical test for officers of the Navy. 20 November 1908. 116257. BUMED Correspondence Files. RG 52. National Archives.
6. Navy Department General Order No. 6, January 6, 1909.
 1. "Test for Naval Officers." *The Daily News*. 20 January 1909. Frederick, MD.
 2. *Annual Report of the Surgeon-General, U.S. Navy*. Washington, DC: GPO. 1910, p36.
 3. Ibid, pg 37.
 4. Stokes, Charles to SECNAV Meyer. 15 August 1910. 120900. BUMED Correspondence Files. RG 52. National Archives
 5. In his book, Müller identified 18 exercises that emphasized breathing, stretching and including push-ups and sit-ups.
 6. Navy Department General Order No. 94, 14 December 1910
 7. "Historical Background on Physical Fitness in the Marine Corps." USMC Historical Collections—Navy Department Library Reference Collections.
 8. Navy Department General Order 127 dated 14 October 1911.

9. Marine Corps Reference.

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